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INTERNATIONAL INFORMATION SYSTEMS FOR DEVELOPMENT

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Why are we meeting here? Altogether we will have most of six days. What do we expect to achieve?

Probably each of you has his own ideas and his own objectives in attending this meeting. And the objectives do not need all to be the same. But, by Friday, I hope that we will have been able to identify these objectives, and to plot a course that some of us, at least, can follow in our work in the weeks and months to come.

At this opening session, I would like to offer our ideas - that is, the ideas of IDRC, as one of the co-sponsors of the meeting - about the objectives of the meeting and where we might be headed.

But, before that, I think it is very important for us to look at this gathering and identify who we are and why we have come together. For it is a rather unusual gathering. As I see it, there are two main groups here.

The first group is composed of senior individuals, identified by ECLA, IDB or by IDRC, as people who have had a lot of responsibilities and experience in decision-making and in promoting actions directed towards economic and social development. In this first group we find policy-makers and planners - people who are, or have been, engaged in the work that occurs at high levels in Ministries of Planning and in Development Banks. Some of you have now moved on to other work; some of you are

now with regional or international organizations. But in putting together the list of invitees, we particularly looked for individuals who had had experience at the national level.

The second group at this meeting are people who are concerned with the provision of information services: I am one of that group. Please note that I do use the word "services" - because the people in the second group do, to a very large extent, see themselves as servants of the people in the first group. Just as in commerce, the customer is always right, and the customer is always the boss. In information services, the user is always right. If he is not satisfied, he will not use the service; and, if the service is not used, it has no right to exist. This meeting is unusual in the sense that it brings together the masters and the servants to discuss how they can best work together to promote wise policy-making, wise planning and wise decision-making in the processes of economic and social development.

We do not only talk about information services, we also talk about information systems. For there has been a considerable degree of modernization in this activity. To use an analogy, the old-fashioned grocery store has given way to the supermarket, and the supermarkets are linked into chains of supermarkets. In the supermarket approach, information is displayed, signposts are erected to lead the customer to the kind of information he is looking for, and it is the customer - not the store clerk - who decides what he will take from the system. So some of us in this second group are information-system builders - some at the national level, some at the regional level, and some attempting to consolidate chains of information systems at the international level. Some of us specialize in a particular line of goods - agricultural information for example - while others trying to gather a very

broad range of goods.

To my mind the main objective of this meeting is to promote a dialogue between the customer and the supplier, to ensure that the right goods are provided, that the goods are provided in the form and packaging that the customer finds most convenient - and to ensure that the price is right.

The analogy with grocery stores only goes so far. The information-system builder is an intermediary, but he is not an intermediary between two completely distinct groups - producers and consumers. For, in our case, the consumers are often also the producers.

Information does not come into existence spontaneously or by accident. It comes into existence because someone decided that it was needed; someone put up the money for a piece of research, for a study, for a survey. The information, and the document in which the information is recorded, is indeed a product of that investment. And it is often Ministries of Planning and other organizations concerned with the development processes who make the decisions to invest in research, studies and surveys, and who thus cause the information to be produced.

So those of us who are in the information business are really there to ensure that the information that you cause to be produced is available when you want to use it again.

It is sometimes said that senior people who set policies, prepare plans and take decisions are too busy to study documents and pull together from these documents all the relevant bits of information that would help them to wise conclusions. This,

to my mind, is an untenable position. If the policy-makers and planners could not use the information, why would they invest in its production? In fact, it is true, of course, that the top-level people do not have time to read a lot of documents and correlate a lot of information from many sources. But these people have staff - and it is to their staff that they entrust this work. Staff distill the information that they get from information services and they prepare position papers for the top-level people to act upon.

So, even if the top-level policy-makers and planners are not direct users of the information services, they are definitely indirect users of these services. It is in the interest of the top-level policy-makers and planners to ensure that the information systems are working smoothly and effectively - both in getting access to the information that has been produced and in delivering this information when it is needed.

Traditionally, the function of providing an information service is entrusted to a library that is located within the institution that it serves. The library has a few staff and a small budget. The individuals are often highly dedicated and hard-working, but it is virtually impossible for them to obtain and catalogue all the information that might be relevant to the needs of the institution. Even an organization with the resources of the World Bank has great difficulty in doing this. It, for example, has four professional librarians wholly devoted to identifying and acquiring the information the Bank might need. And then it has more librarians again to catalogue this information and deliver it to users. And the Bank knows that it is still missing a great part of the information that is relevant to its work. If libraries do not have the backing of information systems, they cannot

hope to get access to all the material that a user might need. And the libraries themselves would be wasting a lot of their time and effort duplicating tasks that other libraries have already performed. For, if each librarian has to separately make his own arrangements for acquiring each document, and then to catalogue it, this takes a lot more effort than if the document is acquired by a supermarket chain, and made available to someone, with the cataloguing already performed.

Early in the program of this meeting, you will be hearing about an information system that has been developed to serve the needs of people concerned with agricultural development, particularly the scientists and technologists concerned with agricultural development. At the global level, the system is called AGRIS and is operated by the FAO; within the overall program, the Latin American countries are operating a regional system called AGRINTER with all its cataloguing and indexes in the Spanish language.

But AGRIS and AGRINTER are successful only because they can rely on national programs for collecting the information that is to be carried in the system and for building local supermarkets to serve the customers.

We, in the information community, want to know whether the seemingly successful experiment of AGRIS and AGRINTER should be replicated to serve other groups concerned with economic and social development. In Latin America, an experiment is underway to build a regional system that would serve the community concerned with policy-making and action in the field of population, migration and family planning. Other systems have been talked about.

But what about the central issues - economic and social

- that have to be considered by Ministries of Planning and Development Banks in making decisions about where to place their investments. There is a lot of information that deals with society as a whole, that relates not just to one sector of economic activity but to all sectors. This information is, to our minds, supremely important - and yet we know that it is not under control.

Proposals have been made to bring it under control and to make it available in national, regional and international organizations concerned with development policy-making and programming. The proposals rest on the experience of AGRIS and AGRINTER; some work is already underway in Latin America and you will be hearing about this later in the meeting. It is the work of CLADES - the Latin American Centre for Economic and Social Documentation - a body that is managed by ECLA. However, there is nothing at the World level that does for this type of information what AGRIS does for agricultural information. A plan has been developed, and the proposed system has a name. It is the DEVelopment Sciences Information System or DEVSIS. A considerable amount of information about DEVSIS is available and is being distributed at this meeting. We shall be looking for your opinions about DEVSIS and, if these opinions are favourable, we would like to plan with you the actions that need to be taken by both groups represented at this meeting to ensure that the system comes into being.

Other systems that will be described are closely related to DEVSIS and complement it. Mr. Dragic will be talking about TCDC, a system that identifies, not documents, but sources of expertise that exist in developing countries and are available to other developing countries. Mr. Brophy will be talking about the world-wide system operated by the United Nations that provides

access to statistical information. We shall also mention CORE - the United Nations' COMmon REGISTER of Projects - which is aimed at identifying all major development projects financed by the UN and ultimately all projects financed by all development-aid agencies.

But whether we are talking about AGRIS or TCDC or DOCPAL (the population system) or DEVSIS, we are talking about systems that are based on cooperation. The essential condition for this cooperation is that each participating country or agency undertakes to identify and report the information generated in its own territory; and, in return it receives access to the complete file after the contributions of all participants have been merged. Each country is asked to do what it should be doing anyway - to make an inventory of its own information. And, having done that, the country can exchange that inventory for copies of the inventories of all other countries.

The formula that we propose is one that places no nation in a position of dependency. It leads to a system in which all have an equal voice. In my belief, it responds to the aspirations of those who drafted the declaration on a New International Economic Order. And I think we can show you, from the AGRIS experience, that the formula works.

If it works and if it is politically acceptable, why has it not swept the World? Why has DEVSIS not been implemented? Why have we not seen systems springing up to serve similar needs in other sectors - education, health, transportation, mineral production etc? I think that the delay is simply due to a failure of our channels of communication - from the people who design information systems to the people who use information systems, and

from the people who use information systems to the people who control the policies of governments and who write instructions to their representatives in the governing bodies of international agencies. There has been a lot of rhetoric about the need to share information among all countries. There is virtually no voice opposing the principles that are now widely accepted. But the diplomats and the politicians have not understood how their principles can be translated into action.

The main objective of this meeting is, therefore, to begin to close the communications gap. If the two groups represented here can agree on what information systems and services best serve the needs of development-policy makers and planners, then together we can go to our governments and to the regional and international agencies, and tell them "Yes, we know what we want. We can be specific - and we ask you to do what is necessary to get these systems built and put into operation."

Personally, I have now been in the international information system business for ten years. During this time, I have seen a great deal of progress made. There is now a lot of experience available, not only in the international and regional agencies, but in national institutions that have been cooperating in the systems that exist. We cannot build twenty systems overnight, for the population of system builders would have to be increased - by appropriate training and by obtaining on-the-job experience. But we could go a lot faster than we are going. I believe that information, and its ready availability, is the most important unexploited source for development. The investments required are relatively small and can mainly be obtained by redirecting efforts that currently go into wasteful duplication. I hope that, by Friday, we can all leave this meeting with a much better idea about what we have to do next to put information truly at the service of development.